

The first year experience: Transition and integration into teacher education

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Research into higher education has established that the first year of study is highly significant, as it is the time when students are most vulnerable in terms of academic failure, as well as most likely to experience social, emotional, and financial problems (McInnis, 2001). Entering university has been shown to move through three distinct stages – separation, transition to the new group, and incorporation/integration (Tinto, 1988). This paper discusses the experience of a cohort of first year pre-service teachers as they move through these stages, reporting on a project undertaken by the Faculty of Education at UTAS. This project involved three elements designed to support students' transition to university study – a week-long orientation program; diagnostic testing in literacy, numeracy, and ICT proficiency; and a program of integrated and embedded support for students identified as at risk in their university study, and their preparedness for teaching. The student cohort is discussed in terms of students' backgrounds, and their reasons for studying teacher education. Following this, the paper addresses students' experiences of transition and the role played by the orientation program in this transition. Finally, students' ongoing questions and concerns related to their dual roles as students and pre-service teachers are explored.

1. Introduction

Over 50 years of study (McInnis, 2001; Hillman, 2005) has established that the first year at university is a highly significant time for students. It is significant not only in terms of predicting students' ongoing success in tertiary education, but also as it is the time when students are most vulnerable in terms of academic failure, as well as most likely to experience social, emotional, and financial problems. Further, it has been established that the first few weeks at university have important implications for

students' long-term engagement and persistence (Macdonald, 1995; Erskine, 2000). As such, it is important that universities identify and attempt to address the range of issues which present potential barriers in this initial transition experience.

This paper explores the experience of a cohort of first-year pre-service teachers as they begin their teacher training, and reports on the outcomes of a project¹ undertaken by the Faculty of Education at the University of Tasmania to enhance this process of transition. This project involved three key elements – a week-long orientation program; diagnostic testing in literacy, numeracy and information communication technology (ICT) proficiency; and an ongoing program of integrated and embedded support in these three areas. This paper discusses the role of the program in shaping students' experiences of their first semester of teacher training, and explores the key issues identified by students as impacting on their transition to this context. Finally, students' ongoing questions are identified, in terms of what might be done to address these concerns now, and for future cohorts of pre-service teachers.

2. The transition to university: Stages and issues

The process of entering university has been likened to moving from one community to another (Tinto, 1988), in that students must leave the known/familiar, and begin again in an unfamiliar environment. Indeed, building on the work of the anthropologist Van Gennep, Tinto (1988) has proposed that the process of beginning study at university moves through three distinct stages – separation, transition, and incorporation. In the separation stage, students disassociate themselves from their membership of prior communities (largely school/home environments), a process which is “at least somewhat stressful” (Tinto, 1988, p. 443) for virtually all students. This may be particularly so for students who are required to physically relocate in order to pursue university study.

In the second stage, transition, students interact with others in the new environment and begin to make connections. This is “a period of passage” (Tinto, 1988, p. 444), where students have not quite separated themselves from the past, and not quite acquired the norms of social and academic interaction with the new context in which they are operating. As Tinto (1988) notes, this stage may be more or less stressful and difficult, depending on the degree to which the *new* environment of the university relates to the *old* environment in which students have previously been operating. For some students, this process may be minor, and relatively seamless. For others, transition may take considerable time and effort. It is during these first two stages that first-year students are often seen to be at greatest risk, in terms of withdrawing from study (Hillman, 2005).

In the final stage of the model proposed by Tinto, incorporation, a student “faces the problem of finding and adopting norms appropriate to the new [university] setting and establishing competent membership in the social and intellectual communities” (Tinto, 1988, p. 446). One key element in achieving the stage of incorporation is the establishment of both academic and social connections, and in order to achieve these connections, extended contact with various members of the university community is needed. Subsequent research has confirmed that student integration in both academic

¹ Funded in part by the University of Tasmania's EDGE Student Experience Catalyst Program.

and social domains is fundamental in making a successful transition to university (see for example Huon & Sankey, 2002; Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005).

Research has also indicated that there are significant challenges that students must face as they attempt to move through these stages in their transition to university. The first challenge relates to finding a balance between study and work commitments – a challenge which increasing numbers of students are facing (McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000). Beginning students often have unrealistic expectations of the amount of time and work involved in university study (Watson, Johnson & Billet, 2002), which can lead to an over-commitment in other activities such as paid employment. As well as leaving insufficient time for independent study, these work commitments can impact on students' transition experience in broader ways. One such aspect is students' ability to participate in, and engage with, the broader social aspects of university culture. When students find themselves in the situation of juggling work and study commitments, their engagement in other aspects of university life decreases. As well as work commitments, other barriers to participation in university life can include long distance travel, and family commitments.

A second significant challenge that students must face in making the transition to university is that of student identity. Students who identify as well-integrated into university life, and have a strong sense of belonging, are often said to have made an effective entry to higher education (Williams, 1982, cited in McInnis & James, 1995). If students do not commit to the role of university student, they often find themselves more distanced or isolated (McInnis & James, 1995). This is particularly complex for students studying to be teachers, as they must become familiar not only with the role of university student, but also student teacher, and eventually practising teacher (Britzman, 1992). The differences between novice and expert positions within these various roles may lead students to disorientation and disengagement from one or more of these roles.

It is clear that the transition to university life can be a difficult and challenging one, which is not made successfully by all students. Indeed, 1999 statistics showed that one third of all students who enter university in Australia fail to graduate, and that half of those who withdraw do so in their first year (DETYA, 2000, cited in Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001). Further, this transition is complex and may take considerable time – we cannot assume that all students will have reached the stage of incorporation within their first week, or even semester, of study. The following section of this paper describes the establishment of a program which attempted to support students in making this transition successfully.

3. Developing the program

Within the Faculty of Education, the EDGE Student Experience Catalyst project commenced in August, 2005. An extensive Australian and international literature review was undertaken, with a focus on transition to tertiary education, tertiary literacy development and discipline selection decision-making processes. In addition, student surveys were conducted to assist the Faculty in identifying ways in which it could best make provision for the orientation and transition of first year pre-service teachers.

3.1 The 2005 student cohort

The Tasmanian higher education context is noteworthy in that there is only one University in the state, with three main campuses (Launceston, Hobart, and the Cradle Coast). UTAS offers a wide range of undergraduate degrees, although not all of these are offered across all campuses. The Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) program is a four year degree delivered at the Launceston campus of the University, with the first two years of the program also available at the Cradle Coast campus in Burnie (150 km north west of Launceston). Students completing the first two years in Burnie must then attend the final two years of the program at the Launceston campus.

An initial survey of first year Bachelor of Education students from both the Launceston and Cradle Coast campuses was conducted in October, 2005. This survey provided information on the demographics of the cohort and their overall first year experience.

Demographics

Across both campuses, the gender ratio was relatively consistent, with 74% of the survey group (n=172) being female and 26% male. A greater proportion of students at the Cradle Coast campus were 25 years or older (48%); in Launceston 23% of students were over 25. The cohort primarily consisted of students living in the north (41%) and north west (37%) regions of Tasmania. Sixteen percent of the overall cohort live in southern Tasmania, while 5% were from Victoria. Less than 1% were from New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia. In 2005 there were no international students. A greater proportion of Launceston campus-based students combined first and second year study than did the Cradle Coast cohort. Overall, 15% of the student population combined first and second year study.

The first year experience

Overall, students from both campuses (97%) agreed that their first year experience had enhanced their understanding of individual learning strengths and weaknesses. Personal organisation, essay writing, and time management were regarded as the most challenging aspects of the first year experience. Other challenges commented upon were workload, motivation/focus, living away from home, assignment expectations, finances, and social aspects. These findings are therefore commensurate with concerns identified in the literature related to student transition.

Based on the literature review and the results of this initial survey, the Catalyst project implemented several key strategies for the 2006 cohort:

1. Orientation/transition
2. Diagnostic assessment in literacy, numeracy and ICT
3. Embedded/integrated support

The following table provides an overview of this program:

Orientation Week - Sessions included: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Campus tours• Essential IT• Lecture and note making workshop	Support Tutorials (6 weeks): <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Commencing week 1 – ICT• Commencing week 2 – Numeracy• Commencing week 7 – Literacy
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Essay writing and referencing skills • Oral presentation skills • The Great Race [collaborative problem-solving] • What literacy skills will I need for university? [diagnostic assessment] • What I need to know about becoming a teacher • What I need to know about becoming a university student • What numeracy skills will I need for university? [diagnostic assessment] • What ICT skills will I need for university? [ICT skills audit] • Preparation for week 1 and beyond • Across the years – course overview 	<p>Study Skills Lectures (weeks 1 – 5)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic integrity • Referencing • Evaluating information/evidence • Punctuation, apostrophes, proofreading • Essay planning/writing <p>Embedded Support in Education core units:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staged assessment tasks • Provision of extensive written feedback on first two assessment tasks • Publication of assessment rubric • Incorporating grammar, spelling and punctuation into learning/teaching activities • School Experience lectures [preparing for the practicum – weeks 6 – 13]
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3.2 *Orientation/transition*

As an initial step in making explicit the academic requirements and expectations of the B.Ed program, an orientation/information kit was prepared and sent to students from mid-January, 2006. This kit contained important advice on preparing for university study, including social information, key dates, timetable planning advice and information directly related to student orientation. As well as information related to starting at university in a general sense, this kit also provided information related to becoming a teacher, and a series of self-appraisal ‘quizzes’ in the areas of literacy, numeracy and ICT. Finally, the kit contained detailed information regarding the Orientation Week program, and the first and second year timetable. While attendance at Orientation Week was not compulsory, the expectation was clearly conveyed that the university year began with Orientation, rather than at the beginning of the academic year (the following week).

An extensive Orientation Week program included activities that oriented students to the physical, ICT, academic and social environment of the university. In addition, the program oriented students to the Bachelor of Education course and to the profession of teaching. Information sessions conducted during Orientation Week provided students with insight into the importance of attaining satisfactory skills both for University study and in relation to their work as beginning teachers.

3.3 *Diagnostic assessment*

During Orientation Week, early diagnostic assessment was incorporated, which had direct connection to ongoing, Faculty-based support for students in literacy, numeracy, and ICT. Support tutorials were offered to those students who did not have requisite skills or capabilities in each of the three key areas. Approximately one quarter of the first year cohort benefited from this support. Strategies to assist students with intermediate skills are currently being investigated.

As well as this Faculty-based support, students were also given information regarding university-level support programs, such as the undergraduate unit *HFE100 Thinking and Writing at University*, taught by the Centre for the Advancement of Learning &

Teaching (CALT), which can be taken as a ‘Liberal Study’ in first and/or second year Education.

3.4 *Embedded/integrated support*

Orientation/transition support is ongoing in that strategies designed to assist students’ transition to University life have been embedded in the core education curriculum for all first year B.Ed students. Assessment tasks in core units have been structured in such a way that ongoing tertiary literacy development is assessed through a staged progression of tasks as follows:

- Stage 1: Assessment task one required students to engage more deeply in the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of their previous education experiences, with the view of going beyond the ‘what’ of schooling. While this was not a ‘formal’ piece of academic writing, specific formatting and grammatical conventions were assessed. Extensive written and verbal feedback relating to structure, expression of ideas, clarity of thinking/writing and writing conventions was provided. There is a clear need for this level of feedback as “one of the watershed experiences in the first year of study is receiving feedback on the first major piece of assessment” (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005, p. 22). Feedback was returned to students two weeks’ prior to the due date of their second assessment piece.
- Stage 2: Assessment task two required students to plan their final essay using a graphic organiser, and identify key points, one of which was to be expanded upon in a scholarly manner. Once again, extensive written and verbal feedback was provided to students at least two weeks’ prior to the due date of the final assessment task.
- Stage 3: Assessment task three was an academic essay. In the preparation of this essay, students were expected to address any tertiary literacy issues identified in the feedback from stages one and two.

Throughout this staged progression, relevant staff were available for one-on-one consultation in relation to the assessment tasks, and feedback/discussion was encouraged throughout tutorials and lectures. In conjunction with this, opportunities for peer review were provided, generic feedback was posted online, and assessment rubrics were made available prior to the due date of each assignment.

To further assist in the development of tertiary literacy skills a series of lectures, incorporating academic integrity, referencing, evaluating evidence and essay planning and writing were mandatory in the first five weeks of semester. As well as this level of support in the academic aspects of tertiary education, ongoing mentor support was available. This supported students in their ongoing social and cultural transition to university life.

All core education tutorials and lectures incorporated three important areas of learning. Firstly, course specific topics were covered, as relevant to the core curriculum. In addition, all teaching strategies implemented were clearly identified to students as those which they may use to assist student learning in future classroom practice. Finally, use of these strategies was encouraged, taking into account their

wider benefit for students' own university studies (such as graphic organisers for structuring writing).

4. The 2006 student cohort

Although based on data related to the 2005 student cohort, the program was provided for the following year's intake. As such, it was necessary to determine early in the implementation, the extent to which the cohorts were similar and different. In order to gain this understanding, a survey was distributed to first year students studying at the Launceston campus in week 2 of semester 1. The Cradle Coast campus student cohort was not surveyed at this time, as they did not participate in Orientation Week activities. Of the 178 students, 165 completed surveys were returned, representing a response rate of 93%.

Of the students enrolled in the program living in the north-west or west of the state (and so able to complete the first two years at the Cradle Coast campus) 16% chose to attend the Launceston campus. Students from the south and east of the state have no choice but to travel to Launceston to study, and make up 20% of the cohort. Almost 14% come from interstate, and five percent of the cohort are international students. Thus, the majority of students enrolled in the B.Ed program live away from home, or travel daily to attend University.

Students engage in paid employment at almost the same level as the national figures suggest (McInnis et al, 2000), although almost 33% of students are not currently working. Of those in paid employment 47.2% work on a casual basis, 16.8% work part-time, and 3% are in full-time employment. Significantly, 40% of students not currently working indicated that they had no intention of seeking employment. As well as working in paid employment the majority of students indicated that they were engaged in other, community-based activities. These activities include weekly sporting commitments or coaching, active church involvement such as scripture classes and youth groups, and arts-related activities such as youth orchestras and drama clubs. This time commitment is often in addition to part-time or casual work. In addition, 22 students have children of their own.

This level of commitment to activities beyond university has significant implications for the way students engage academically with university, most noticeably in first year when they are learning to balance work, study, and other commitments. The high level of commitment to non-university activities may also be expected to impact upon students' social engagement with university life. In teacher training there are further implications, as students must undertake a ten-day practicum in their first year (with combined first/second year students taking on an additional 15 days), and must also come to terms with the multiple roles expected of them.

In terms of students' perceived preparedness for university, findings from this survey mirrored those of Clerehan and Walker (2004), in that the majority (75%) felt they were either 'not at all' or 'moderately' prepared for university prior to Orientation Week. Almost 40% of students had undertaken at least one of the University's generic preparation programs (most commonly the five-day UniStart program offered as a summer school). As such, students were commencing study with diverse levels

of academic preparation, and with a range of levels of proficiency in literacy, numeracy, and ICT.

Some differences were noted between the 2005 and the 2006 first year cohorts. In terms of gender, female students now make up 83% of the cohort. Females under the age of 20 represent 59% of the cohort, while males continue to be under-represented in teacher education (Grant, 2004): only four males over the age of 25 are enrolled in 2006. More students have enrolled in the program from interstate - almost 14% - and five percent of the cohort are international students. Significantly more students combine their first two years of Education in 2006 (22%) than in 2005 (15%). The spread of ages, backgrounds, and prior experiences represented in the cohort demonstrates the diversity with which students come to university, impacting on their learning needs and their preparedness for university life.

Given students' perceived preparedness for university, their level of commitment to paid and unpaid activities outside of study, and the time spent in travelling to and from campus, these students might be expected to face all of the difficulties in the transition process described above. Many of them may find that they have insufficient understanding of the commitment of time required for university study, resulting in a lack of available time for academic and social activities. Many may struggle with the levels of academic proficiency required of them, both at university and in the classroom whilst on practical placements. Finally, many may find it challenging to take on the roles of student and teacher, or may not feel as though they 'belong' academically or socially.

In order to better understand students' experiences of transition, focus groups were identified and interviewed during semester 1. These included students combining their first and second year of Education, international students, interstate and out of area students, refugee / ESL students, students enrolled in support classes, and mature-aged students. Responses from these students regarding their experiences of transition, and the role of the Catalyst program in this process, are discussed in the next section.

5. Transition to UTAS and the Catalyst project

5.1 Reasons for engaging in teacher education

In understanding students' experience of transition, it is important to first identify their reasons for engaging in teacher education. Data obtained through the focus group interviews indicate that students enter the course with a variety of purposes and goals. The most commonly identified reason for pursuing a career in Education related to students' prior experiences in teaching contexts. For some, this involved reflecting on their experiences interacting with children, either informally, or through work in formal teaching and/or child caring occupations. These students highlighted their desire to encourage and motivate students – including a stated desire to work with those children often seen as 'slipping through the net', thereby helping those from marginal groups achieve better levels of education. Students who described their reasons for pursuing a career in Education in this way spoke of developing their existing passion for teaching and working with children.

The second reason provided by students for studying Education related to obtaining professional experience and qualifications. Students spoke of the value of obtaining a widely recognised, portable qualification, that would allow them to work in international settings. Some students spoke specifically of wishing to pursue their teaching career in developing countries at the conclusion of their training, while international students spoke of using their teaching qualification in order to teach English in their home countries. Further, students recognised that a qualification in Education would provide them with a 'marketable' degree, that could potentially open up other professional avenues.

The final reason provided by students for their decision to pursue a teaching qualification related to qualities they identified within themselves, that they felt would make them suitable teachers. For example, students spoke of their patience, understanding, and ability to relate to children as being particularly influential. Other students spoke of their own desire to contribute constructively to the world around them, becoming role models for children's lives. Importantly, all students believed that teaching children constituted a worthy contribution to society, and that this was a significant motivation for them. These findings indicate students' engagement with the process of becoming teachers, which has implications for their transition to university.

5.2 *Students' experience of transition*

In focus group interviews, students' comments about their process of transition identified a number of similarities across the cohort, as well as issues unique to each student sub-group. The common issues identified included: the time involved in making a successful transition; the difficulty in managing time and expectations; the role of university staff in making the process easier; the usefulness of a clear understanding of one's own goals and anticipated outcomes; and the difficulty in identifying the multiple roles required as a pre-service teacher (and the benefit of persevering with this identification process). In addition to these shared issues, specific sub-groups identified such concerns as dealing with the difficulties encountered from a cultural perspective (international students), and the contrast with previous university experiences (first/second year combined students). These will be discussed in turn.

In terms of the time required to make the transition to university successfully, a number of students expressed surprise at how long this process took. Although they may have expected to quickly become competent in managing their time and organising their study, students found that in practice, this often took longer than anticipated. Indeed, some students noted that this had taken months to effectively manage, with one student commenting that: "It's taken about 13 weeks for it to come together." Once students began to develop an understanding of the requirements of university, they found that they were becoming more settled, more relaxed, and more established in their routine. This issue highlights the importance of providing an ongoing program to assist students in their transition to university – as often problems do not arise in the first weeks.

Perhaps the most commonly reported issue impacting on students' experience of transition related to forming clear and realistic expectations of the amount of time required for university study. One aspect of this theme related to forming

understandings about the subject matter of units. Students noted that ideas presented were often complex, and required time and thought in order to reach a level of understanding. The way material was presented to them meant that often it was up to the students themselves to find the links between various ideas, and to grasp the key ideas of the discipline. This involved a number of activities, such as reading, researching, questioning evidence, and discussing tentative ideas with others – a process that was scaffolded through the staged assessment tasks of students' core first year unit. Many students had not anticipated the amount of time that would be required to effectively engage in this process, and achieve the necessary levels of understanding. For example, one student said:

I was a little bit unsure at the start and only about a week ago it all went boom and sort of gelled in a sense. I've waited for my second assignment to come back to start my third assignment because I'm at that stage where I need that feedback, which I have found very valuable to my next assignment... I thought why wasn't I told exactly what to do with the last [assignment], and that's constructivism, that you have to grasp that understanding for yourself.

Students had come to recognise the role of initiative in achieving this level of understanding – that answers would not be provided for them, rather they would have to develop their own.

Another aspect related to the need to form appropriate expectations of the time required for study was the difficulty experienced by some students in 'fitting in' outside life/work commitments. This was particularly the case for mature-aged students, who often have extensive family, work, and social commitments prior to entering university. The challenge these students face in their process of transition is finding what to 'let go' of in order to make room for study. One student described their process of discovering this issue: "You don't realise how much work you've actually got to put into it until you look at it, and then you realise that the next four years are going to be a hard slog, and that some things are going to have to be put aside. Family commitments have to be juggled, work has to be juggled." Often, students described social aspects of university life as the first to be sacrificed in achieving this balance: "I haven't really immersed myself into the social aspects of [university life], as I don't have time for that." As noted earlier, this may have significant impact on students' long-term engagement with university.

Students identified their interactions with university staff as particularly influential in their successful transition. The approachability and availability of staff were seen as key aspects of adjusting to university. International students, in particular, identified the fact that support was provided by academic staff as highly significant in their experience of transition – even if they did not take advantage of this support. Students in general felt as though staff were genuinely concerned:

You don't get any negative thoughts from anybody, especially from tutors or lecturers, as they want to be there, they want to share their knowledge... it's nice to feel like the teachers like being here, and are interested in you as well, what you want to learn and if you want to learn rather than just being there.

In this way, students identified that it was not only that teaching staff were approachable that had made their transition easier, but also that staff were committed to the work with which they were engaged. Students felt as though they were being noticed as individuals, and that their development was also being noticed. This is one step in a process of community building – a specific outcome of the Catalyst program that will be discussed in the following section.

The next aspect of the transition process that students identified as significant was the ability to focus on one's goals and intended outcomes. Students felt that knowing why a particular course was being studied, and what it would lead to, were significant motivating factors during difficult times. This issue was particularly commented on by international students, one of whom said: "I know my purpose for studying, so [the transition] was okay for me... we want to work hard, this is why we came here and chose Education to study." Mature-aged students also identified this focus on career-oriented outcomes as a significant factor, and indicated that this was one identifying factor related to being mature-aged: "You are a lot more focused as well, I know I am probably a lot more so than some of the younger ones... we have a little more behind us and we know what we want at the end of the course and our aim." However, for other mature-aged students, this focus on career aspirations became an additional pressure. One student spoke about what was 'at stake' in choosing Education, in terms of providing a better life for children and finding a job that would provide this. The value of education – financially, emotionally, and in terms of family – was a significant factor in both the motivation to succeed, and the fear of failure.

Students also indicated that the multiple roles required of them in studying to be teachers was a daunting aspect of making the transition to university. The first challenge in this regard was the range of roles students were required to adopt. One student spoke of identifying primarily with the role of student: "I've always seen myself as a student, and then to suddenly turn around and become a teacher... it's taking quite a long time... I never actually thought that one day I would do it. It feels so strange." Another student, who had previous school experience, commented that: "It's a very daunting thing... coming from student to teacher role." Students noted that as well as becoming familiar with a range of roles, they were also required to understand the complexity of each. For example, one student said:

You need to know the theories, the styles, you need to have other ideas, because really with teaching, you just don't go in and do it all off the bat so to speak... I've always had one thought about what teaching is, and I'm starting to find out that there's a lot more to teaching than what that one thought is... it's amazing how much variety and skills a teacher needs to acquire.

For some students, School Experience lectures were seen as particularly valuable, in that they went some way towards bridging the gap between the two roles of teacher and student. These lectures highlighted the complexity of entering the school environment, and provided students with a framework for interpreting their classroom experiences. This framework has immediate application, in that students undertake their first practical placement at the end of first semester.

In terms of issues identified by specific sub groups within the first year cohort, two are significant. The first is the previous transition experience of those combining their first and second years of study in Education. These are students who enter Education after earlier university study (usually one year) predominantly from the Faculty of Arts. These students are given credit for their first year Liberal Studies component, and as such combine first and second year core Education subjects. First/second year students interviewed for this project indicated that they already had some level of proficiency in some academic tasks (such as note-taking, and information literacy) – so in effect, they were already ‘oriented’ to many of the aspects commonly seen as important in starting university study. However, issues arose in terms of their lack of specific content knowledge and experience with a range of assessment tasks commonly used in Education (such as lesson plans, and art portfolios). This affected their ability to engage with the role of teacher, as well as student, and therefore their transition into Education.

International students also identified one specific issue as significant in their transition. This was the matter of cultural differences, and the impact of these differences in terms of their participation in class, and their development of social networks. With regard to class participation, students acknowledged that university is very different from schools in their country of origin, and that this difference may have impacted upon their engagement and participation. One student, from China, stated that she found Australian tutors and lecturers to be more “laid back” than teachers in China, and that tutorials were “very casual”. In China, this student “would not dare to question a tutor, or ask for clarification”, and so has not been inclined to do that at university in Australia either. Further, the student noted the importance of approaching teachers if assistance is needed, and claimed that she would try to do this more in future. In terms of the development of social networks, international students felt that they were at a disadvantage, largely because of stereotypical attitudes held by Australian students. One student, for example, commented that “They judge us before they know us. They think because we look Asian we can’t speak English... the first thing said to me by a student was oh, you can speak English... people have stereotypes about Asian people.” These students did note, however, that with time this situation had improved, as closer links were forming between students from different cultural backgrounds.

It is important to note that although the issues of prior transition experiences, and cultural differences, were each identified by only one group, both issues were highly significant for the members of these groups. The following section examines the role of the Catalyst project, in shaping these experiences of transition for all first year B.Ed students.

5.3 *The benefits of the Catalyst project for students’ transition experience*

Students identified three significant benefits resulting from the components of the Catalyst project (outlined in section 3.2), with regard to their experience of the first semester of teacher education. These were the provision of information related to the demands of university study and the B.Ed course, the community-building aspects of the project, and the induction into the education profession.

The first significant benefit of the Catalyst project was that students clearly understood course expectations with regard to attendance, tertiary literacy,

participation in lectures and tutorials, assessment requirements, and the time commitment required to successfully engage in study. This information was primarily conveyed through the Orientation Kit, and reinforced during Orientation Week. One student commented on this aspect of Orientation: “It sort of, well scared me a little bit and I thought, oh god am I doing the right thing, but it was a big help because it gave me an insight and it told you okay, you’ve got to get on your feet and stand up and take responsibility.” International students commented that during Orientation Week, they had found information about approaches to study “too much to take on”, but as they began writing assignments, they were able to contextualise and understand this information.

Students also commented on the staged assessment model, in that this approach had scaffolded their learning about academic writing and expectations: “I wouldn’t have been able to write an essay properly without their input and that’s what I found really helpful... it’s been so much better getting that feedback and not failing straight off.” Students identified that the processes of planning that had been required by these assessment tasks would have wider benefit for their university study, and could be used in multiple subjects. Diagnostic assessment and support sessions were also viewed as beneficial in identifying one’s current skill level, and how this matched expectations – despite initially appearing daunting. One mature-aged student, who had attended Literacy support, stated: “I didn’t want to turn up to it at first, I’m thinking oh yeah, I don’t need this sort of thing, but I’ve really enjoyed it and I find that I probably will miss it.” Another student indicated that the Catalyst program as a whole has been significant in establishing clear expectations:

It’s the whole process that’s happened over the past 13 weeks, it’s Orientation, it’s HFE100, it’s the study skills, the whole thing, knowing what to expect... it was really good to be able to work out what you needed, what you didn’t need, get some direction, clarification of expectations.

As part of Orientation Week activities, the issue of the multiple roles that pre-service teachers must engage with was a focus – for example, through sessions presented by practising teachers. One student commented on this specific aspect of the program: “I found the most I got out of it was listening to other teachers come and talk, and listening to what they had to say really got me thinking about why I was doing this course.” Beyond Orientation Week, some students commented on the role of the ongoing support program in helping them to understand their development as teachers and learners. One student, who had attended Literacy support classes, commented on this issue:

The way I look at those support sessions, is actually refining those skills we do need, so that when I come out of here and do go into teaching, at least those areas are going to be up to a good standard... it’s been an important thing, because I’ve actually been able to help my nieces and nephews who have weaknesses in those areas, and so you’re able to use what you’re learning here.

Comments such as this highlight the relevance of embedded support to students' chosen career, and the importance of establishing links between what is learnt at university and the future classroom context.

The most frequently commented-upon benefit of the Catalyst project was the sense of community established over the course of the semester. This outcome was first identified in relation to the Orientation Week program, with students noting the importance of this program in giving them some initial contact with staff and students, which could be further established throughout semester. For example, one mature-aged student said: "When we had our orientation, we got to know other people and the teachers, rather than just one-on-one, and I found that really good... instead of walking into a class blind and not knowing anyone else, I knew that person from there, and that person from there." However, students also identified the importance of initiative in making these first contacts: "It works on initiative, you go out and talk to people and make friends, you have to do that because they are the people you're going to spend the rest of the four years with."

A further aspect of this theme that developed over Orientation Week was students beginning to identify themselves as 'Education students'. One student, who had studied Arts in the previous year, commented that: "When you do Arts, you have, okay, this is my History group, and this is my whatever group, but with Education you mix with everybody... and you're running into people all the time." This process started with 'The Great Race' – an activity during Orientation Week that required students to work in teams to further familiarise themselves with the campus and solve problems collaboratively. Several students commented that this had been the most notable aspect of Orientation Week: "One thing in my mind is when we did that [session] and had to work in different groups, had to communicate with each other... that helped a lot... that would have been my number one thing in orientation." This gave students a sense of belonging and community, that they often did not feel in other courses.

Students noted that their sense of establishing and belonging to a community was developing over time, supported by the various aspects of the Catalyst project. One student, who had attended the support tutorials, commented that she was becoming more comfortable in working with students and staff in this context: "The sense of community on campus has grown for me, in relation to students and lecturers as well, realising that they are approachable, and that things can be spoken about in confidential terms." Other students spoke of the collaborative aspects built into their core Education units, which enabled them to further develop their social networks, working with students from different cultural, social, and academic backgrounds.

A common theme raised by students in discussing the varied benefits of the Catalyst project was the developmental nature of the support offered, beginning prior to Orientation Week, and continuing throughout the whole of first semester. Students felt that this had allowed them to face the challenges of transition into both the social and academic environment of university sequentially, rather than simultaneously. One student spoke of being 'eased into' this environment: "It was an easing in, you meet people this week, and then the stress of study next week, not the stress of both things all at once." This comment serves to reinforce the importance of a developmental program of support, which does not end in week 1 of semester.

The benefits of a developmental program were clear with regard to the Catalyst project, in that students identified very few ongoing concerns at the end of semester 1. For some students, the issue of time management, in terms of balancing work, study, and family commitments had not yet been fully resolved. However, even students who identified this as a concern were aware of their own responsibilities and the need to give sufficient time to their studies. The combined first/second year students had ongoing concerns related to assessment, particularly with regard to their second year subjects assuming certain knowledge about curriculum and teaching that they were yet to acquire. There appears to be limited scope within the Catalyst project to address these concerns, and this may instead be an issue best addressed through discussions of program sequencing and coherence. The final ongoing concern identified by several students to date related to still not feeling as though they have established strong social networks. One mature-aged student made the following comment: "I feel like a bit of a minority group because of my age, and in a sense I can see other minority groups, people coming from another country or from another state that do feel a little bit out of the loop." This concern, which was also raised by international students, may be one area where further support can be established, once the cohort begins semester 2 this year. Overall, there were surprisingly few ongoing concerns identified by students, and as such it appears most were able to make a successful transition to university over the course of the semester. Given students' comments regarding the outcomes of the Catalyst project and its impact on their experiences of starting at university, it is reasonable to conclude that this project has assisted students in making this important transition.

6. Conclusion

The experiences of transition described by students in this paper mirror much of the literature in the area, in that students faced several significant challenges to engaging in university life, and experienced this as a movement from separation to incorporation over the course of the semester. For some students, this appeared to take place quickly – with students describing the Orientation Week as a key moment in their transition to university. For others, this was a process that took much of the semester, with support through embedded and integrated approaches taking on greater significance. For these reasons, it is important that programs which aim to support students in the process of transition take into account their ongoing needs and issues.

The attention given by students to understanding the expectations of their course of study indicates that the information we provide must be clear and relevant. This applies equally prior to, and during, the enrolment process. Interactions with university staff are also important, as when staff are seen as interested and engaged in students' transition process, a sense of community is established. This sense of community enables students to feel as though they are supported by academic staff, and therefore that they are able to raise issues of concern which can then be dealt with collaboratively. This is also of benefit to staff, in that with a more engaged student body, more meaningful outcomes can be attained. Goals can be discussed and negotiated; independence can be nurtured and extended. Students have the freedom and the space to explore not only their roles at university, but also in the wider educational community.

In acknowledging the stages of transition, from separation to incorporation, the Catalyst project has successfully provided students with the opportunity to develop this community. The separation stage, where students must move away from the familiar and approach new expectations and processes, was supported through the provision of Orientation information, detailing what was expected and required of a pre-service teacher. A week-long Orientation program was developed in order to assist students in the transition stage, where they are moving from the old to the new and interacting for the first time in the new environment. In terms of establishing the academic and social connections required for the final stage, incorporation, a range of strategies were employed, including diagnostic assessment and ongoing embedded support to assist students academically, and structured opportunities for authentic group engagement to assist students socially. Of course, not all students will have achieved incorporation into the university context during first semester – and it appears that international students and mature-aged students have found this more difficult. However, the Catalyst project provides a strong foundation upon which we can continue to build an academic and social community for these students, and our future cohorts.

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